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LETTER DATED 9 NOVEMBER 1992 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Acting under paragraph 5 of resolution 771 (1992) of 13 August 1992 and paragraph 1 of resolution 780 (1992) of 6 October 1992 where the Security Council calls upon States "to collate substantiated information in their possession or submitted to them relating to the violations of humanitarian law, including grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions being committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia ... and make this information available", I have the honour to present to you the attached report "Inside the Death Camps of Bosnia: the Savagery," written by Mr. Roy Gutman and published by New York Newsday on 18 October 1992. Mr. Gutman's reports have been widely circulated and used as a source for subsequent reports by the international humanitarian organizations.

Mr. Gutman has expressed strong willingness to present his findings related to this report and to many other widely read reports to the Security Council, the Secretary-General and the Commission of Experts, collectively or individually.

May I ask for your kind assistance in having these reports made available to the Commission of Experts established pursuant to resolution 780 (1992).

(Signed) Muhamed SACIRBEY
Ambassador and
Permanent Representative

Annex

INSIDE THE DEATH CAMPS OF BOSNIA: THE SAVAGERY

By Roy Gutman
EUROPE CORRESPONDENT

Omarska, Bosnia-Herzegovina - The vast mining complex here, with its open pits and ore-processing system, looks like anything but a concentration camp.

The nondescript buildings in their barren frontier landscape have been cleaned up, and there is no trace of the blood reputedly spilled here. But during the last months dozens of eyewitnesses have provided compelling new evidence of murder and torture on a wide scale at this complex, where the Serbs who conquered Bosnia brought several thousand Muslims and Croats to die.

According to former detainees, the killing went on almost everywhere:

Inside the huge hangar-like building that houses earth-moving equipment, armed guards ordered excruciating tortures at gun point, sometimes forcing one prisoner to castrate another.

The tarmac outside was an open-air prison, where 500 to 1,000 men had to lie on their bellies from dawn to dusk.

Thousands more packed the offices, workshops and storage rooms in the hangar and a glass-and-brick administrative building. All were on starvation diets.

The two most-feared locations were small outbuildings some distance from the main facilities: the "Red House" from which no prisoner returned alive, and the "White House", which contained a torture chamber where guards beat prisoners for days until they succumbed.

Unlike Nazi concentration camps, Omarska kept no real records, making it extremely difficult to determine exactly how many died. Guards often chose victims at whim and had to ask other detainees to identify the corpses. "They never knew how many people were killed from one shift to the next," observed a 22-year-old Omarska survivor who asked that his name not be used.

New York Newsday first reported mass murders at Omarska and other camps on August 2. Five days later, as television pictures of emaciated prisoners were transmitted around the globe, Serb authorities closed the camp and dispersed the prisoners. But not until hundreds of survivors reached the West in the last few weeks, aided by the International Red Cross, was it possible to draw up a detailed account.

A month-long Newsday investigation that included extensive interviews with officials who said they were responsible for Omarska and with dozens of former detainees in Croatia, Britain and Bosnia itself, produced these main conclusions:

Eyewitness accounts of detainees indicate that well over 1,000 people were killed at Omarska, and thousands more probably would have died of beatings, executions, disease or starvation had the camp not been closed.

A large number of detainees, possibly as many as 1,000, seem to have disappeared without a trace when the camp was closed.

All but a few detainees were civilians, mostly draft-age Muslim or Croat men, but there were many men under 18 or over 60, and a small number of women.

Newsday's estimate of the death toll of more than 1,000 is based on the eyewitness accounts of daily killings by three former detainees who spoke in separate interviews. It does not reflect other, possibly duplicative, first-person reports of mass executions or disappearances; if it did, the toll could easily be twice as high.

Three Bosnian journalists who were detained at Omarska and are now being held in another camp arrived among themselves at an estimated death toll of 1,200 or more. And International Red Cross officials said at least 2,000 people who went to Omarska are unaccounted for.

Nine hundred miles from here, outside London, Edin Elkaz lies awake nights, his head filled with the screams of the men being tortured in the room next door at the White House. During one month at the camp, the 21-year-old said, he witnessed some of the killings next door and the removal of bodies the next day, saying the guards slaughtered 5 to 10 men a night.

The guards sang as they beat the Muslim and Croat prisoners to death, sometimes nationalist songs about "greater Serbia", other times religious melodies from the Serb Orthodox liturgy, he said.

E. L., a 26-year-old Muslim, spent two months here and said he helped load between 5 and 10 corpses daily from the White House into a yellow pickup truck that removed them to an unknown grave. Like many of those interviewed, he asked that his full name not be used.

And N. J., a 23-year-old Muslim, said he kept a count each night for the final 20 nights of the inmates marched to the Red House. Some days there were as few as 17, some days as many as 42. None ever returned.

Interviews with these three detainees, who are among 68 taken to Britain to recover from beatings and shootings, and from several hundred who recently arrived in Karlovac, western Croatia, provide chilling amplification of the original reports of atrocities at the camps in Bosnia.

U.S. dismissed tales

Reacting to the early accounts, Lawrence Eagleburger, now the acting U.S. Secretary of State, said on August 18, that the administration had found no evidence of systematic killing, only of "unpleasant conditions." But after conducting its own interviews recently with about 40 former detainees in Karlovac for submission to a special United Nations war crimes panel, the U.S. Embassy in Zagreb has concluded there were other camps in the surrounding towns, said John Zerolis, an embassy official.

"The Nazis had nothing on these guys. I've seen reports of individual acts of barbarity of a kind that haven't come up in State Department cable traffic in 20 years," said another top official at the U.S. Embassy, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

But even the U.S. Embassy interviewers have been unable to determine the number of people held at Omarska, the number killed or the number missing.

Extensive Newsday interviews with prisoners indicate that at least 2,500 to 3,000 detainees were held in Omarska at any one point. International Red Cross officials have a working estimate that a total of up to 5,000 prisoners were taken to Omarska, and that well over 2,000 of them are unaccounted for.

Despite the imprecision of the statistics, the story of Omarska and other concentration camps in Bosnia constitutes one of the most savage chapters of modern European history.

Serbs from nearby Prijedor set up camps at Omarska and Kereterm, an unused tile factory, on May 25, not quite a month after they seized power by force in the town of 30,000. Officials from Prijedor were eager to present their version of events but acknowledged under questioning by Newsday that it was only the official account. "You have your facts. We have our facts. You have a complete right to choose between the two versions," Police Chief Simo Drljaca said in an interview last month.

Almost nothing in the official version stands up to scrutiny.

During a tour of the administration building at the camp, Zeljko Mehajuc, the former commander of the guards, took a visitor to a basement room packed with rows of bunk beds. There were never more than 270 prisoners at Omarska at any one time, Mehajic said, and "this is where they all slept."

But the detainees said they had slept on the ground, on floors or crouching jammed into closets - anywhere but in beds. The beds were brought in a few days after the media drew attention to Omarska according to a foreign humanitarian aid expert. The authorities raided military barracks for the bunks and the hotels of Banja Luka for the bedding, he said. Only when the bunks were in place were the Red Cross and reporters allowed to visit.

"Natural Causes" cited

According to Milan Kivacevic, the city manager in Prijedor, Omarska was an investigative facility, set up "to see who did what during the war, to find the guilty ones and to establish the innocent so that they didn't bear the consequences." He said the camp was closed when the investigation was completed.

Drljaca, a little-known law graduate who became police chief when the Serb minority took power, said 3,334 people were arrested on suspicion of resisting or plotting against the new Serb authorities and were taken to Omarska. Drljaca insisted that no one had been killed at Omarska, and that only two prisoners died between May 25 and mid-August, both of "natural causes." Another 49 "disappeared," including the former lord mayor of Prijedor, Mohamed Cehajic, and were presumed dead, Drljaca said.

In the official version, detainees were interrogated for four days and shipped out. Drljaca said 800 detainees who were alleged to have "organized the whole thing", among them "rich Muslims who financed" the Muslim SDA political party, were taken to Manjaca, which was operated by the Bosnian Serb army as a prisoner-of-war camp, to await criminal trial. Taken with them were 600 people who reputedly commanded units of the Muslim and Croat resistance. The remaining 1,900 were found innocent and taken immediately to Trnopolje, which officials said was a transit camp, Drljaca said.

But no one of more than three dozen Omarska survivors whom U.S. Embassy officials interviewed at Karlovac said he had been questioned before being incarcerated at Omarska. Only a few of several dozen interviewed by Newsday had been interrogated and they said they had been beaten before and during questioning. Most had been held more than two months.

Slobodan Balaban, an ethnic Serb who was technical director of the mining complex, said Serbs were motivated to operate the camps by revenge for the perceived suffering of Serbs in other conflicts. "The main factor that influenced our conduct has been the treatment of our people who were taken to Croatian camps," he said.

Horrors Corroborated

While official accounts are riddled with contradictions, the reports by survivors of Omarska of severe deprivation, brutal tortures and routinized slaughter are consistent and corroborative as well as mind-numbing. According to those reports, some of which follow, savagery enveloped prisoners from their arrival.

Tahirovic Redzep, 52, said he was brought to Omarska with hundreds of others on May 26, after Serbs destroyed and "cleansed" the nearby Muslim town of Kozarac. In a sworn statement given to the Bosnian office on war crimes investigation, he said guards called out a dozen people a day for five days and decapitated them with chain saws near one of the main pits. Redzep said

Omarska prisoners were forced to witness the massacre as well as the subsequent execution of 20 non-Serb policemen from Prijedor.

D. K., a 25-year-old ethnic Albanian now recovering outside London, had the luck to be shot by accident on arriving at Omarska on May 30. "I was there only 20 minutes," he said. He had been among 15 men standing near the camp entrance who were fired at by a trigger-happy guard. D. K. lifted his pajamas to show seven bullet wounds on his stomach, legs and arm. Three detainees died in the shooting, but D. K. was taken to a hospital in Banju Luka, where he was in a coma for 15 days. When he came to, he said, nurses, Serb patients and even Serb children visitors came and beat him. "I had gotten 12 pints of blood, and they beat me because I had Serb blood," he said.

Edin Elkaz was also lucky to be shot by accident on arrival May 30 and taken to a hospital in Prijedor, for it reduced his exposure to the violence in the camp. Elkaz had been a Bosnian soldier, one of the few Omarska prisoners who had actually fought the Serbs. Stuffed with 130 others into a one-car garage, Elkaz was standing near the door when guards seized a friend of his and executed him outside.

The bullet penetrated the door, entered the stomach of Elkaz's brother and finally came to rest in Elkaz's leg. In the hospital for six weeks with his leg suspended from a bar, Elkaz never recovered because Serbs came by and poked the wound with a stick repeatedly reinfecting it.

"I had a very good (Serb) neighbour who came by one day and said hello. I came to regret it," Elkaz said, smiling at the irony. "He brought 15 people to beat me up over six weeks."

Once back in Omarska, he was taken with several other Bosnian soldiers to a room in the White House. He could see the beatings through a glass door. The guards used wooden clubs and iron bars and usually concentrated on the head, the genitals, the spine and the kidneys. Sometimes they smashed prisoners' heads against radiators. "You'd see pieces of flesh or brain there the next day," Elkaz recalled.

But the worst torture was to stand a prisoner against the wall and beat him with a cable. "I think they killed at least 50 men with that cable," Elkaz said.

The Red House

Each morning, he said, detainees laid out the corpses on the tarmac in front of the White House. Others then loaded them into the small yellow truck that had just been used to deliver food to the camp kitchen. A four-man burial detail would accompany the truck, but only one would return alive.

No prisoner is known to have survived the Red House, and only a few even witnessed detainees being taken each night to the outbuilding, well away from the main buildings. From mid-July until Omarska was closed, starting at

8 p.m. each night, guards collected men from different locations in the camp and took them to a holding area at the White House, according to the former detainee, N. J. Guards asked them for names and family details, then marched them away individually. At about 4 a.m. prisoners would hear a truck drive up to the Red House, apparently to collect the corpses.

Although guards often combed the many rooms where prisoners were kept and called out names from lists, many of those killed or beaten were selected at random. "The guards would come in at 3 a.m. and take five people out, telling us they were going to be exchanged. Where they took them, God only knows," said M. M., a 28-year-old plumber held with more than 500 men for more than two months in a room adjacent to the giant hangar. "Next morning we would see the dead bodies. I am sure that 50 per cent of those who disappeared would be killed."

Often the guards did not know whom they had beaten to death. Elkaz recalled that "sometimes they would call them by name. But sometimes they would ask me afterwards, 'Do you know who this is?'" He said he identified many friends who had been beaten to death.

There were ways to avoid beatings, detainees said. Rule 1 was never to look a guard in the eye. Rule 2 was that if called to an interrogation, to confuse the guards by saying he had just come from one. Prisoners sometimes smeared themselves with blood from a newly beaten detainee "so that we would be spared as much as possible in the next round, Kamber Midho, 31, said in a sworn statement.

Primitive Tortures

The tortures were as primitive as anything recorded. At least one prisoner was burned alive at Omarska.

The burning occurred in late July as detainees lined up for lunch, according to Nedjad Jadzic, 23, an eyewitness now in Karlovac. The man was emerging from an interrogation, and a guard ordered him to run, as if in preparation to shoot him. "You cowards. You know nothing but cruelty," the man taunted the guard.

When the guards were shoving him on the tarmac, he grabbed a gun from one of them, but then gave it up. "They shoved him toward the White House, poured gasoline over him and set him alight," Hadzic said.

And Osman Hamuric, who is now recovering outside London, told Newsday he had twice witnessed forced cannibalism at Keraterm camp.

On one occasion, he said guards cut off a prisoner's ear and forced another man to eat it. The second time, a prisoner was brought in wounded and the guard cut off the wounded piece of flesh and told him to eat it. He refused. "Why not? It's cooked," Hamuric quoted the guard as saying. Hamuric could not say whether the man ate his own flesh. "All I know is that they took him away and we never saw him again."

Motorcycle Castration

Yet nothing was more traumatic for the men than the castrations. U.S. Embassy officials found a witness to an incident in which a man had his testicles tied with wire to the back of a motorcycle, which took off at high speed. He died of massive blood loss.

Hazdic described a castration in an interview with Newsday. The incident began when a guard with a grudge to settle called out Emir Karabasic, a Muslim policeman, from the room in which Hadzic was sleeping and ordered him to strip naked in the hangar in front of parked dump trucks. "Do you remember the time you beat me up in the cafe?" the guard asked.

As Hadzic watched from the next room, a second Serb policeman found another Muslim, against whose father he had a grudge, and ordered him to lower his face into a channel cut in the concrete floor and drink old motor oil, then to bite off Karabasic's testicles. "The shrieks were unbearable. Then there was silence," said Hadzic, who said he vomited.

Experiences as these have left deep psychic scars on the survivors, among them a Roman Catholic priest from near Prijedor, who gave a vivid description of his suffering to parishioners in Zagreb. The priest, who spoke briefly with Newsday but insisted he not be identified by name, told them he had been beaten so much he was vomiting blood.

From dawn to dusk, he lay out on the tarmac with hundreds of other men. For 32 days, the priest said, he did not have a bowel movement because he had not eaten any food. "It was so terrible that, God forgive me for saying so, but we were grateful when someone died. We could take their clothing and place it under us," an attendee at his speech quoted him as saying.

During their first five days in Omarska prisoners were generally given no food at all, the witnesses said. After that time, they were taken in groups of 30 to the cafeteria for lunch, the sole meal of the day, a slice of bread and a bowl of thin soup.

The beatings that accompanied trips to the toilet were so severe that former detainees said they preferred to defecate in their boots or in the rooms in which they had to sleep. Dysentery was rampant at the camp, and conditions were so unclean that some prisoners counted 10 different forms of lice or vermin on their bodies. "We had lice on our eyelids. They'd fall out of your beards," said Hadzic. Detainees said they were bathed only twice all summer. The guards ordered prisoners to disrobe in groups of 50 and then aimed fire hoses at their genitals. "It was pure sadism. They'd laugh if we fell over," Hadzic said.

The Disappeared

Many detainees never made it to safety and seem to have disappeared "in transit" to or from Omarska. These included two busloads of men who disappeared from Omarska at the end of July. Another 120, according to

witnesses, were to be taken from the Kereterm camp to Omarska on August 5 but never turned up. About 11 men who were transferred to Manjaca did not arrive. Guards slit the throats of two and killed another nine, prisoners said.

The Manjaca commander, Popovic, disclaimed any knowledge of that alleged atrocity. "I am not interested in what happened outside the gates. My responsibility is only for what happens under my control."

But the biggest mystery is what happened to the people transferred from Omarska at the time of its closing. Prisoners said they reckoned a population of 2,500 to 3,000 at Omarska, basing their estimates on such things as counts of the lunches served on a particular day. Of the prisoners there at the end, 1,374 were transferred to Manjaca, according to the International Red Cross. About 700 others went to Trnopolje, according to prisoners later taken from there to Karlovac. That leaves between 500 and 1,000 missing.

Moreover, of the number transferred to Trnopolje in early August, only about 200 made it to Karlovac. Some had been on a convoy into Central Bosnia in which more than 250 men were slaughtered by local police.

Were other Omarska prisoners killed in other ways? Were they dispersed to other camps?

No one has an answer, not even Thierry Germond, the chief European delegate for the International Red Cross, which has tried to win freedom for all the civilian and military detainees in the war. All Germond could say was, "We understand your concern, and I share it."

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